DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 437 187 PS 028 161

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TITLE Gender Differences in Human Cognition. Counterpoints: Cognition, Memory, and Language Series.
ISBN ISBN-0-19-511291-1
PUB DATE 1997-00-00
NOTE 188p.
AVAILABLE FROM Oxford University Press, 2001 Evans Road, Cary, NC 27513 (ISBN-0-19-511291-1, $19.95). Tel: 800-451-7556 (Toll Free); Fax: 919-677-1303.
PUB TYPE Books (010) -- Information Analyses (070) -- Opinion Papers (120)
EDRS PRICE Document Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS *Adolescents; *Adults; *Cognitive Ability; *Cognitive Development; Cohort Analysis; *Intelligence; Literature Reviews; Mathematical Aptitude; Meta Analysis; Research Design; Research Methodology; Research Needs; Research Problems; *Sex Differences; Spatial Ability; State of the Art Reviews; Theories; Verbal Ability
IDENTIFIERS Scientific Thinking; Study of Mathematically Precocious Youth

ABSTRACT

Noting the fascination of both researchers and the general public with possible gender differences in human cognition and whether these differences originate in biology, childhood influences, or cultural stereotypes, this book summarizes research studies on gender differences in cognition. The book examines social and cultural implications of this research focus, and discusses whether differences have decreased over time. Chapter 1 reviews the historical development of research into gender differences with regard to its relevance to contemporary discussions regarding gender differences in intellectual abilities. This chapter also describes issues involved in conducting and evaluating such research, and examines the range of theoretical explanations of findings. Chapter 2 introduces meta-analysis techniques and reviews research on gender differences in verbal, mathematical, spatial, and scientific abilities. In addition, the chapter examines findings from the Study of Mathematically Precocious Youth and describes results suggesting that gender differences have been decreasing. Chapter 3 maintains that research on gender differences in cognition has been poorly conceived and executed, and that its findings have been interpreted to keep women "in their place." The chapter further suggests that profound conceptual and methodological problems undermine the validity of such research, and raises the basic question of why the search for gender differences is so intense. Chapter 4 illustrates some negative consequences of a focus on differences and uses a framework to demonstrate how situational and contextual variables can give rise to systematic gender-related effects of cognitive performance. Chapter 5 integrates the main conclusions from various contributors into a single statement regarding the nature and origins of gender differences in human cognition. Each chapter contains references. (KB)

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